

**Correspondent:** Mr Gilbert M. Sape  
Global Head of Campaign - Bears and Traditional Medicine  
World Animal Protection

**Email:** [GilbertSape@worldanimalprotection.org](mailto:GilbertSape@worldanimalprotection.org)

**Joint open letter to:**

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus Director General World Health Organisation Avenue Appia 20 1211 Geneva Switzerland	Dr Zhang Qi Co-ordinator of Traditional and Complementary Medicine Unit (TCM) Department of Service Delivery and Safety World Health Organisation Avenue Appia 20 1211 Geneva Switzerland
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

6<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Dear Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Dr Zhang Qi,

**COVID-19: Health risks and wildlife<sup>1</sup> markets – the need for a permanent global ban on wildlife markets and a highly precautionary approach to wildlife trade.**

The undersigned organisations acknowledge and commend the World Health Organisation’s current efforts to contain the pandemic spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

On the occasion of World Health Day, in the midst of a global pandemic believed to have originated in a live wildlife market, we call upon the WHO to publicly and unequivocally state the proven link between these markets and serious threats to human health. In line with its stated mission to serve public health at all times, we urge the WHO to recommend that governments worldwide permanently ban live wildlife markets and the use of wildlife in traditional medicine. This decisive action, well within the WHO’s mandate, would be an impactful first step in adopting a highly precautionary approach to wildlife trade that poses a risk to human health.

While a robust global response is critical in detecting, treating and reducing transmission, it is equally necessary to take vital measures to prevent similar emerging infectious diseases developing into pandemics with the associated threats to human life, and social and economic well-being.

The COVID-19 outbreak is believed to have originated at wildlife markets in China, and transmitted to humans as a result of close proximity between wildlife and people.<sup>2</sup> Further research suggests that bats and pangolins may have been involved in the transmission chain of the virus to people<sup>3</sup>. But let us stress that it was the actions of people that created the environment in which this transmission was possible.

This is not the first time that infectious diseases have been linked to wild animals in recent years. Between 2002 and 2003, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), inflicted by a coronavirus which is also believed to have emerged from wildlife markets in China, resulted in more than 8,000 human

---

<sup>1</sup> In this document the term ‘wildlife’ refers to fauna in the wild or bred in captivity.

<sup>2</sup> Shereen, M.A., Khan, S., Kazmi, A., Bashir, N. and Siddique, R., 2020. COVID-19 infection: origin, transmission, and characteristics of human coronaviruses. Journal of Advanced Research.

<sup>3</sup> Andersen, G.A., Rambaut, A., Lipkin, W.I. et al. The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2. Nat Med (2020)

cases across 29 countries, and 774 deaths<sup>4</sup>. Failure to enforce permanent bans on all wildlife markets then allowed for a similar, but more severe, disease to emerge. Other significant zoonotic diseases, the transmission of which has been associated with wildlife, include Ebola, MERS, HIV, bovine tuberculosis, rabies, and leptospirosis.<sup>5</sup>

Zoonotic diseases are responsible for over two billion cases of human illness and over two million human deaths each year.<sup>5</sup> How many of these cases directly or indirectly originate from wildlife is hard to calculate, due to overlapping reservoirs in livestock and wild animal populations. However, considering the significance of wildlife as a reservoir of emerging infectious diseases, wildlife origins of zoonoses must be of primary concern. Sixty percent (60%) of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic and 70% of these are thought to originate from wildlife.<sup>6</sup>

The risk of zoonotic disease transmission is heightened further by the unregulated and unhygienic conditions associated with wildlife markets, where close proximity between humans and animals provide the perfect opportunity for pathogens to spread. This risk is further exacerbated by the conditions in which animals are typically farmed or collected from the wild, transported to and held at such markets, which inevitably result in large numbers of animals of different species being held in crowded conditions in close proximity, causing immense stress and weakening their immune systems. Such conditions, coupled with close proximity to people at wildlife markets, provide the ideal situation for pathogens to replicate, spread, and potentially infect people.

Pangolins, which are considered likely by some researchers to be involved in the transmission chain of COVID-19, are commonly used as ingredients for Traditional Medicine, as are many other wildlife species such as turtles, leopards, tigers, lions and bears, with bear bile injections being officially recommended as a treatment for COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> These animals are either farmed or poached from the wild to supply the demand - a practice that is entirely unnecessary given the viable plant or non-wildlife based alternatives recognized by Traditional Medicine. Risk of disease transmission is prevalent across all aspects of wildlife trade, which supplies products to the Traditional Medicine industry. For example, bovine tuberculosis has been documented among wild and captive-bred lions, posing a substantial risk of zoonosis to consumers and people involved in the lion bone trade, particularly those who work in breeding farms, slaughter and processing facilities in South Africa. Reptiles such as snakes and geckos, which are also used in Traditional Medicine, are frequent sources of Salmonellosis infections in people.<sup>8</sup>

While Traditional Medicine is a recognized medicinal system in many countries and cultures, and can play an important health role, the vast majority of ingredients are plant or mineral based, with hundreds of recognized alternatives to ingredients derived from wildlife. The trade in wildlife and parts and products derived from them for Traditional Medicine is unnecessary and indefensible, as it poses a risk to global health. Studies have highlighted that over 80% of Traditional Medicine consumers would consider herbal or synthetic alternatives to wild animal products.<sup>9,10</sup> In China,

---

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organisation. Summary of probable SARS cases with onset of illness from 1 November 2002 to 31 July 2003. [https://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/table2004\\_04\\_21/en/](https://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/table2004_04_21/en/)

<sup>5</sup> Grace, D., Mutua, F., Ochungo, P., et al. Mapping of poverty and likely zoonoses hotspots. Zoonoses Project 4. Report to the UK Department for International Development. 2012

<sup>6</sup> Jones, K.E., Patel, N.G., et al. Global trends in emerging infectious diseases. *Nature*. 2008

<sup>7</sup> Office of the Chinese Medicine Bureau, General Office of the Health and Health Commission. Notice on Issuing a New Coronary Virus Pneumonia Diagnosis and Treatment Plan (Trial Version 7). issued March 03 2020. Available as PDF on [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-03/04/content\\_5486705.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-03/04/content_5486705.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Mermin, J., Hutwagner, L., Vugia, D., et al. Reptiles, Amphibians, and Human Salmonella Infection: A Population-Based, Case-Control Study. *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 38 (Supp 3). 2004

<sup>9</sup> World Animal Protection. Cruel Cures – The industry behind bear bile production and how to end it. 2020

<sup>10</sup> Moorhouse, T.P., Coals, P.G.R., D’Cruze, N., Macdonald, D.W. Reduce or redirect? Which social marketing interventions could influence demand for traditional medicines? *Biological Conservation* 242.2020

academics recognized that a ban on wildlife consumption is not enough to protect public health from wildlife-associated diseases. They called on the government to support transitioning the wildlife farming industry away from the production of Traditional Medicine.<sup>11</sup>

Any policies and practices that sustain the wildlife trade carry a huge and unpredictable public health risk that could lead to future outbreaks and pandemics of zoonotic diseases among human populations.

The impact of COVID-19 in terms of loss of human life, physical and mental health, the global economy, livelihoods and the quality of public life has been utterly devastating and cannot be underestimated. At the time of writing, COVID-19 has led to 1,218,114 confirmed cases and 65,841 deaths across 208 countries. According to calculations by the UN and others, the COVID-19 pandemic could cost the global economy between US\$1 - 2.7 trillion and is triggering a global recession forcing states to introduce costly stimulus packages.<sup>12,13</sup> The costs to the international community of fighting a global pandemic are vastly higher than the costs of preventing it in the first place, including eliminating live wildlife markets and funding the coordinated global response needed to bring an end to the wildlife trade.

**In conclusion, the demand for wildlife and wildlife products is a primary cause of the emergence and spread of zoonotic diseases and a severe risk to global health. We call on the World Health Organisation to recognise that it has a significant role to play to mitigate such global health risks.**

**We therefore strongly urge the World Health Organisation to:**

- Recommend to governments worldwide that they institute a permanent ban on live wildlife markets, drawing an unequivocal link between these markets and their proven threats to human health.
- Recommend to governments that they address the potential risks to human health from the trade in wildlife - including collection from the wild, ranching, farming, transport, and trade through physical or online markets for any purpose – and act to close down or limit such trade in order to mitigate those risks.
- Unequivocally exclude the use of wildlife, including from captive bred specimens, in the WHO's definition and endorsement of Traditional Medicine and revise WHO's 2014-2023 Traditional Medicine Strategy accordingly to reflect this change.
- Assist governments and lead a coordinated response among the World Trade Organisation, World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and other multilateral organisations worldwide in awareness-raising activities to clearly inform of the risks of wildlife trade to public health, social cohesion, economic stability, law and order, and individual health.
- Support and encourage initiatives that deliver alternative sources of protein to subsistence consumers of wild animals, in order to further reduce the risk to human health.

We welcome your consideration of this important matter and stand ready to assist.

Yours sincerely,

---

<sup>11</sup> Wang, H., Shao, J., Chuai, Z., et al. Wildlife consumption ban is insufficient. *Science*. Vol 367, Issue 6485. 2020

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Coronavirus: Can policymakers avert a trillion-dollar crisis? 9 March 2020: <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2300>

<sup>13</sup> Bloomberg. Coronavirus Could Cost the Global Economy \$2.7 Trillion. 6 March 2020: <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-coronavirus-pandemic-global-economic-risk/>

**For and behalf of the following organisations:**

1	AAP Animal Advocacy and Protection	121	Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust
2	Aberdeen Music Tuition	122	Humane Research Australia
3	Action for Elephants	123	Humane Society International - Africa
4	Africa Network for Animal Welfare	124	Humane Society International - Australia
5	African Pangolin Working Group	125	Humane Society International - Global
6	All Life In A Viable Environment	126	HUTAN - Kinabatangan Orang-utan Conservation Programme
7	Amboseli Trust for Elephants	127	In Defence of Animals - India
8	Ananta Jyoti Dhayn Kendra	128	In Defence of Animals - USA
9	Animal Alliance of Canada	129	In Defense of Animals International
10	Animal Concerns Research & Education Society	130	Institute for Critical Animal Studies - Africa
11	Animal Defenders International	131	International Aid For Animal Foundation
12	Animal Friends Jogja	132	International Animal Rescue
13	Animal Guardians	133	International Fund for Animal Welfare
14	Animal Kingdom Foundation	134	International Otter Survival Fund
15	Animal Legal Defense Fund	135	International Wildlife Bond
16	Animal Liberation Sanctuary	136	Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
17	Animal People Forum	137	Japan Anti-Vivisection Association
18	Animal Projects & Environmental Education Sdn Bhd	138	Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund
19	Animal Protection Agency	139	Japan Wildlife Conservation Society
20	Animal Protection and Environmental Sanctuary	140	Korea Animal Rights Advocates
21	Animal Protection Denmark / Dyrenes Beskyttelse	141	KYMA sea conservation & research
22	Animal Protection Party of Canada	142	La Fondation Droit Animal, Ethique et Sciences (LFDA)
23	Animal Sanctuary Trust Indonesia	143	Lady Freethinker
24	Animal Society for the Protection of Animals (Macau)	144	Landmark Foundation
25	Animal Talk Africa	145	Lawrence Anthony Earth Organization
26	Animal Welfare And Anti Harassment Society	146	Liberia Chimpanzee Rescue & Protection
27	Animals Asia Foundation	147	Lifelong Animal Protection
28	Animals Australia	148	Love Animal House Thailand
29	Annamiticus	149	Melbourn Dolphin
30	Ape Alliance	150	Monkey Helpline
31	Association Daridibó	151	Moving Animals

32	Baboon Matters	152	National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
33	Bali Street Dog Fund Australia	153	National Council of SPCAs South Africa
34	Ban Animal Trading	154	Natural Resources Conservation Network
35	Bat Conservation Trust	155	NY4Whales
36	Bears in Mind	156	Oceanic Preservation Society
37	Beauty Without Cruelty - South Africa	157	OneKind
38	Big Cat Rescue	158	Orangutan Appeal UK
39	Biofuelwatch	159	Orangutan Foundation
40	Blood Lions	160	Orca Rescues Foundation
41	Blue Cross of India	161	OSCAP
42	Blue Sky Society Trust	162	Outraged South African Citizens Against Rhino Poaching
43	Bonobo Conservation Initiative	163	Pan African Sanctuary Alliance
44	Born Free Foundation - International	164	Panthera
45	Born Free Foundation - UK	165	Panthera Africa
46	Born Free Foundation - USA	166	Pegasus Foundation
47	Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre	167	People for Animal Care and Kindness
48	Borneo Nature Foundation	168	People for Animals, Odisha
49	Brighter Green	169	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)
50	Bring the Elephant Home	170	Performing Animal Welfare Society
51	Cape Leopard Trust	171	Pettus Crowe Foundation
52	Captured in Africa Foundation	172	Pit-Track K9 Conservation & Anti-Poaching
53	CATCA Environmental and Wildlife Society	173	Pro Elephant Network
54	Center for Biological Diversity	174	Pro Wildlife
55	Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education	175	Rapad Maroc (Morocco)
56	Cetacean Society International	176	Responsabile Nazionale Diritti Animali
57	Change for Animals Foundation	177	Rettet den Regenwald (Rainforest Rescue)
58	Chelui4lions	178	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
59	Coalition of African Animal Welfare Organisations	179	SAI (Save Animals Initiative) Sanctuary Trust
60	Code Animal	180	Sanctuary Education Advisory Specialists
61	Community Dog Welfare Kopan	181	Sanctuary for Health & Reconnection to Animals & Nature
62	Compassion in World Farming	182	Sarawak Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

63	Compassion Unlimited Plus Action	183	Save The Asian Elephants
64	Conservación de Mamíferos Marinos de Mexico	184	Scorpion Foundation Indonesia
65	Countryside Management Association	185	Sea Shepherd Legal
66	CPR Environmental Education Centre	186	Sea Shepherd South Africa
67	Danau Girang Field	187	SEY Animal Welfare Finland
68	David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation	188	Shark Research Institute
69	Defenders of Wildlife	189	Showing Animals Respect and Kindness
70	Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management, Taraba State University Jalingo	190	Society for Dolphin Conservation, Germany
71	Deutscher Tierschutzbund e.V. (Germany)	191	Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals - Selangor
72	Djurskyddet Sverige (Animal Welfare Sweden)	192	Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals - Singapore
73	Dogstop	193	Society for the Protection of Animals Ljubimci
74	Dutch Gorilla Foundation	194	Society for Travelers Respecting Animal Welfare
75	Dutch Society for the Protection of Animals (Dierenbescherming)	195	Soi Dog Foundation
76	Earth Island Institute Int'l Marine Mammal Project	196	South Peninsula Customary Khoisan Council
77	Eco Activists for Governance and Law Enforcement (EAGLE Network)	197	Southern African Fight for Rhinos
78	Elephantatics	198	Species Survival Network
79	Elephant Human Relations Aid	199	Stichting Painted Dog Conservation
80	Elephant Reintegration Trust	200	Stichting SPOTS
81	Elephants Alive	201	Sumatran Orangutan Society
82	Elephant Voices	202	Tanglewood Foundation
83	Elephation	203	Taraba Nature Conservation Initiative - Nigeria
84	EMS Foundation	204	Teyeliz, A.C
85	Endangered Species Coalition	205	The Corbett Foundation
86	Environmental Investigation Agency	206	The Emergent Disease Foundation
87	Equilibrium Futures	207	The Gorilla Foundation
88	Eurogroup for Animals	208	The Humane Society of Canada
89	FAADA, Spain	209	The Jane Goodall Institute - Nepal
90	Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations	210	The Philippines Animal Welfare Society
91	FIAPO	211	The Winsome Constance Kindness Trust
92	Fish Welfare Initiative	212	Tree of Compassion
93	Fondation Brigitte Bardot	213	Trésor Foundation
94	Fondation Franz Weber	214	TRUNKS & LEAVES Inc
95	For Elephants	215	Tusk Trust

96	For the Love of Wildlife (FLOW)	216	Unexpected Wildlife Refuge
97	For Tigers	217	Vervet Monkey Foundation
98	Foundation Chimbo	218	Voice for dogs abroad
99	Four Paws - International	219	Voice4Lions - South Africa
100	Four Paws - South Africa	220	Voice4Lions - UK
101	Franciscan Order - Hong Kong	221	VShine Animal Protection Association
102	Fraternité pour le respect animal	222	Water and Environment Media Network - Uganda
103	Freeland	223	Wellbeing International
104	Friends of Animals	224	Wild Futures
105	Friends of Conservation UK	225	Wild Law Institute
106	Friends of the Orangutans Malaysia	226	Wild Welfare
107	Future 4 Wildlife	227	WildAid
108	Future for Elephants	228	WildAid Southern Africa
109	Future for Elephants e.V.	229	Wildlife ACT
110	Gearing Up 4 Gorillas	230	Wildlife Alliance
111	Global Animal Law	231	Wildlife Impact
112	Global March for Elephant and Rhino Poaching	232	Wildlife Rescue
113	Global White Lion Protection Trust	233	Wildlife Rescue and Conservation Association, Guatemala
114	Gordon Consulting New Zealand	234	Working Wild
115	Great Apes Film Initiative	235	World Animal Net
116	Greek Animal Welfare Fund	236	World Animal Protection - Africa
117	Green Girls in Africa	237	World Animal Protection - International
118	GREY2K USA Worldwide	238	World Cetacean Alliance
119	Greyhound Compassion	239	World For All Animal Care And Adoptions
120	Help Animals India	240	Zoocheck Canada
		241	Zoological Society of London